

In the Claims:

Please enter the following amended claim set:

1. (original) An adjustable grading system comprising:

a frame;

a plurality of elongated elements retained at opposite ends within said frame and moveable along said frame;

a spreading device provided with a plurality of recesses each for receiving an elongated element, adjacent recesses spaced apart by a pre-determined distance and separated by a tooth;

wherein a group of said elongated elements are spread by said pre-determined distance by orientating said spreading device so that said recesses extend diagonally across said elongated elements at an angle such that respective teeth are disposed between adjacent elongated elements, pushing said teeth between said adjacent elongated elements so that individual elongated elements are guided into respective recesses, and re-orientating said recesses to lie substantially transverse to said elongated elements, thereby spacing said elongated elements by said pre-determined distance.

2. (original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said spreading device comprises:

first and second combs, each comb provided with a plurality of recesses, each for receiving an elongated element, adjacent recesses spaced apart by said pre-determined distance and separated by a tooth; and,

a link arrangement linking said first and second combs together in a manner whereby the distance between said first and second combs can be varied while maintaining said first comb substantially parallel to said second comb.

3. (original) The system according to claim 2, wherein said link arrangement comprises first and second link bars, each link bar pivotally coupled to each of said first and second combs.

4. (original) The system according to claim 3, wherein said spreading device further comprises first and second slats pivotally coupled to said first and second link bars and said first and second combs are detachably coupled to said first and second slats respectively.

5. (original) The system according to claim 1, further comprising one or more spacers which engage said elongated elements after said elongated elements are spaced by said pre-determined distance and maintain the spacing of said elongated elements after removal of said spreading device.

6. (original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said frame includes first and second opposed tracks each for receiving one of the ends of each of said elongated elements.

7. (original) The system according to claim 6, wherein at least one of said tracks is provided with an aperture through which an elongated element can be inserted into, or withdrawn from, said frame.

8. (original) The system according to claim 1, wherein said elements are shaped so that when two adjacent elongated elements are in contact side-by-side, a valley is formed therebetween.

9. (original) The system according to claim 1, wherein at least each alternate elongated element has a substantially circular cross-section.

10. (currently amended) A spreading device for spreading a plurality of side-by-side elements by a pre-determined distance, said device comprising:

a plurality of recesses, each recess configured for receiving an element, adjacent recesses spaced apart by said pre-determined distance and separated by a tooth, wherein a group of said elements can be spread by said pre-determined distance by orientating said spreading device so that said recesses extend diagonally across said group of elements at an angle such that respective teeth are disposed between adjacent elements, pushing said teeth between said adjacent elements so that individual elements are guided into respective recesses, and re-orientating said spreading device so that said recesses lie substantially transverse to said elements, thereby spreading said articles by said pre-determined distance;

first and second combs, each comb provided with a plurality of said recesses, adjacent recesses separated by a respective tooth; and

a link arrangement linking said first and second combs together in a manner whereby the distance between said first and second combs can be varied while maintaining said first comb substantially parallel to said second comb.

11. (canceled)

12. (currently amended)The spreading device according to claim ~~[[11]]~~ 10 further comprising first and second slats pivotally coupled to said first and second link bars and said first and second combs are detachably coupled to said first and second slats respectively.

13. (original) A method of spacing a plurality of side-by-side elements by a spacing distance comprising the steps of:

(a) providing a spreading device provided with a plurality of recesses, each recess for receiving one of said elements, adjacent recesses spaced apart by a spacing distance and separated by a tooth;

(b) juxtaposing said elements relative to each other so that mutually adjacent elements are spaced by a distance less than said spacing distance;

(c) orientating said spreading device so that said recesses extend diagonally across a group of said elements and respective teeth are disposed between adjacent elements;

(d) pushing said device onto said elements so that individual elements are guided into respective recesses; and,

(e) re-orientating said spreading device so that said recesses lie substantially transverse to said elongated elements, thereby spacing said elongated elements by said spacing distance.